



Larry Zuckerman. *The Rape of Belgium: The Untold Story of World War I.* New York: New York University Press, 2004. xi + 337 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9704-4.



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Belgian Victims, German Perpetrators

What most casual readers of modern history remember about Belgium and the First World War is the litany of exaggerated claims of war crimes perpetrated by the German military. The British press related fantastic stories of soldiers impaling babies on spiked helmets, nailing kittens to church doors, and perhaps the most infamous charge, raping legions of Belgian girls. The “rape of Belgium” was a powerful metaphor employed by allied propaganda to raise money, boost recruitment, and win the war of world public opinion. Larry Zuckerman, a professional writer and novelist with a broad array of interests, recognizes that the Germans were accused of bizarre crimes. His goal is to recount Germany’s true war crimes in Belgium and, in his words, “show why the crimes matter, what legacy they left, and why they offer a new way to look at the First World War” (p. 1). Zuckerman falls short of this ambitious goal, but he does an adequate job of describing multiple issues surrounding Belgium’s role in the First World War, including its dire situation on the eve of war, British and American actions and inaction regarding Belgium, and the Belgians’ reactions to their occupiers.

The fundamental and most consistent weakness in the book is the absence of German archival sources. Zuckerman relies on German newspapers and some published reports from various parts of the German government, both of which are woefully inadequate for relaying the German perspective. This is unfortunate since the military archives in Freiburg contain a wealth of information concerning the German military occupation from key decision makers down to individual units. Zuckerman would have found ample evidence to support many of his arguments, specifically the deliberate manner in which occupation authorities exploited Belgian resources and labor.

Zuckerman organizes *The Rape of Belgium* chronologically, beginning with recounting Belgium’s deliberations when faced with the German ultimatum to step aside and allow the German armies to cross Belgian territory unscathed. Zuckerman then details the German invasion, which he maintains was fueled by anger and resentment over the Belgian decision to fight and slow the progress of the time-sensitive Schlieffen Plan. The Germans, scared time was running out as Russia mobilized,

took out their frustration on the Belgian population and committed a series of atrocities during the first weeks of the war. Zuckerman describes the atrocities as remembered by Belgian bystanders, foreign reporters, and other unreliable sources with an uncritical eye. Zuckerman uses the sack of Louvain to prove the German military engaged in a criminal enterprise from day one: "Soldiers broke down doors, hauled people out, and either shot them or sent them to the train station where a firing squad or detention waited. Sometimes the civilians endured mock executions before the real sentence was carried out. Priests were particular targets, and two had lighted cigars applied to their faces before being shot" (p. 61). The events at Louvain were used by both sides in a heated propaganda war. The Germans accused Belgian civilians of firing on soldiers as part of a brutal and cowardly *Volkskrieg* that violated international law and necessitated harsh counter measures.

The German plan to remove Belgium as an obstacle permanently and ensure that a future Germany would be surrounded by harmless states open to German influence involved splitting Belgium into its Flemish and Walloon elements. Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg encouraged Flemish leaders to declare independence and gravitate towards the German sphere. In Zuckerman's analysis, this pursuit of *Flamenpolitik* was just one aspect of the rape of Belgium.

Germany saw idle Belgian workers and factories as a convenient solution to its shortages of both. Zuckerman details the occupation authorities' various violations of the Hague Conventions and insists that the occupation was a comprehensive terror involving economic exploitation and suppression of basic rights enforced by constant surveillance and physical intimidation. Military governor General Moritz von Bissing set the tone of the occupation when stating, "the [Belgian] population must be trained to respect law and order and discipline and be brought nearer to Germandom" (p. 105). Zuckerman has a habit of portraying the Belgians' plight during the war as especially harsh without realizing the same conditions applied to all participants. German civilians also starved, suffered reduced birth weight, and had basic lib-

erties stripped under the Hindenburg and Ludendorff dictatorship. Zuckerman is right, however, when noting that "Belgians were lucky that the occupation lacked certain features that would mark Stalinist Russia or Hitler's Germany, but people in parts of Nazi-occupied Europe would have recognized Belgium as familiar" (p. 103).

The most interesting portions of the book are those in which Zuckerman details the changing attitudes of the allies towards Belgium. The allies, including the neutral United States, expressed shock and disgust at Germany's flagrant violation of Belgian neutrality. The Belgian government in exile toured Britain and the United States lobbying for aid and consideration during the inevitable peace conference. The mistake the allies made was in focusing on the invasion and not the occupation, especially the German policy of deporting Belgian workers under the guise of volunteers when they were in fact coerced. Zuckerman describes the miserable conditions visited upon workers forced into "allocation camps." It is this aspect of the occupation that Zuckerman wants us to remember and one the victorious allies seemingly forgot when meting out punishment and reparations at the Versailles.

Zuckerman concludes by lamenting how Belgium fell through the cracks during the proceedings at Versailles. France was the real victim, while Belgium was viewed as a nuisance that, despite an unpleasant occupation, lost a token percentage of men in battle. Germany, in Zuckerman's view, dodged the consequences for its crimes against Belgium. The allies downplayed the neutrality violation, considered war tribunals too complex, and arranged for a small percentage of reparations for Belgium. Zuckerman, as he does throughout the book, exhibits near-complete ignorance about German domestic issues and does not discuss in even passing terms the internal chaos of the Weimar Republic. In his effort to prove that Germany's actions in Belgium were a prelude to German actions in the Second World War, Zuckerman does an admirable job of telling the story of the Belgian occupation while only scratching the surface of Germany's political, economic, and military reasons for managing the occupation the way it did.

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